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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NOUAKCHOTT 000620

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: REMINISCING WITH ABDALLAHI'S MINISTERS

Classified By: CDA Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Charge met with two Abdallahi Ministers, Minister of Agriculture and Livestock through all three Abdallahi governments Correa Issagha and Minister of Economy and Finance during the first two governments Abderrahmane Ould Hama Vezzaz, for their political assessment. Both were concerned but generally optimistic about a return to constitutionality. Both saw errors in pre-coup administration that had helped set the conditions for the coup and had ideas about how to do better next time. End Summary

Correa Issagha  
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¶2. (C) Charge called on Issagha October 20 to follow up on reports that Issagha had been arrested the previous day for impersonating a minister. Charge was also interested in the insights of one of the few ministers who had survived all three Abdallahi governments. Issagha confirmed that he had been ordered to meet with the Attorney General on the 19th. He said police came to his door without a summons early in the morning saying he had to go see the Attorney General. Issagha told them he would go of his own volition on the 21st. Otherwise he would have to be shown a duly executed summons or be taken in by force. After several quick contacts with their headquarters, the police were instructed to bring Issagha in against his will (although Issagha described this as a respectful and non-abusive process). The Attorney General told Issagha he was being summoned because he continued to sign documents and present himself as a Mauritanian Minister and had caused the country embarrassment during the early October ACP Summit in Accra where he had insisted on being seated as the "official" Mauritanian delegation causing difficulties for the regime's own delegation. Issagha responded first by challenging the Attorney General to show him documentary evidence he had signed anything as Minister after August 6, but then declared "I am the Minister of Agriculture and Livestock of President Abdallahi and, as is my right as a citizen, I refuse to acknowledge any other president." The Attorney General let him go with a, "Well, now you've been warned," statement. Issagha said the police had confiscated his diplomatic passport upon his return and that a promised regular passport had yet to be issued. The FNDD leadership had suggested Issagha stay in Senegal after the Ghana meeting as their sub-Saharan envoy but Issagha responded "I don't want to be a refugee."

¶3. (C) Turning to politics, Issagha (a mixed

Afro-Mauritanian Pulaar/Black Moor) advocated support for Popular Alliance for Progress (APP) president and President of the National Assembly Messaoud Ould Boulkheir's exit strategy. He reviewed the three governments he had served in starting in with the technocratic first government under Zein Zeidane which he saw as high minded and smart but ultimately hobbled by traditional political forces that felt left out (like the parliamentarians who had created ADIL as the President's party and then demanded a slice of the pie). The first Waghef government tried to make allowances for regional and ethnic representation but Issagha saw that as opening a Pandora's box of every group wanting more and a division of government unity as ministers increasingly worked for their group's interests over national interests. Issagha said the political wrangling never gave him a chance to truly evaluate Prime Minister Waghef as a manager since Waghef never got out of the starting gate. Issagha dismissed the second Waghef government as being so compromised by the military to be considered a government. Issagha, who was always seen as an opposition member in the Abdallahi governments, said Abdallahi had been fatally indecisive on many issues but that he had shown integrity and firmness on the two most important points -- the return of Mauritanian refugees and the reversal of slavery. He saw Aziz as incensed by Abdallahi's attention to "black issues" and said Aziz saw the Afro-Mauritanians as having too much influence in the Abdallahi governments (even though they remained under-represented as a percentage of population).

14. (C) Charge asked what Issagha would like to see differently if and when democracy is re-established. Issagha

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said greater focus on multi-nationalism (i.e. a shared Afro-Mauritanian, White Moor, and Black Moor identity) but he was quick to say this should not be quota driven. Issagha argued that too much of Mauritanian society is based on racial and tribal connections and that simply giving a bigger cut to Afro-Mauritanians and Black Moors would only reinforce that negative tendency. Issagha recognized traditional tribal and clannish leaders as important for political consensus but thought a model had to be found that respected their influence without letting them run the show. "Let the best qualified person get the job," is Issagha's mantra. He dismissed the argument that affirmative action was needed to give Mauritanian blacks equal competitiveness saying, "there are lots of skilled Mauritanian blacks but they aren't in Mauritania. They would come back if they thought they could actually put their skills to work." Issagha chided Leader of the Opposition Ahmed Ould Daddah as the epitome of clannish politics saying, "He says Abdallahi won only because the military gave Abdallahi money. Ould Daddah lost because Mauritians didn't want to see him come in to settle the clan accounts against those who overthrew his father."

Abderrahmane Ould Hama Vezzaz  
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15. (C) Vezzaz was easily the minister most respected by the international community in Abdallahi's first two governments. Working 18-hour days non-stop, Vezzaz rebuilt Mauritania credibility with the IMF and the World Bank, was the driving force behind Mauritania's extremely successful donors conference in December 2007, and was the point person for every major donor program including our own MCC initiative. Those close to Vezzaz indicate he was under threat by the military and was scared. Others suggest his ego (he's good and he knows it) put him in conflict with Prime Minister Waghef. Either way, it is understood he chose not to be in the second Waghef government and was not fired. Vezzaz told Charge his health had deteriorated after his work in government. After the coup, he "got away from it all" in a quixotic month-long desert camping trek. Since his return, he has been working within the FNDD as an ADIL representative but has shun the limelight. As opposed to most FNDD leaders, Vezzaz strongly claims a personal tie to President Abdallahi

that is reflected in his thoughts on an exit strategy.

¶6. (C) Despite his personal friendship with Abdallahi, Vezzaz said, "the coup was pre-ordained the day the President signed the paper making Aziz a general and rearranging the military leadership according to Aziz's instructions." While Vezzaz agreed with Charge that initially there was a symbiotic relationship between Aziz and Abdallahi and that Aziz could not mount a coup since he did not have support of the rest of the Mauritanian military hierarchy, he said that after a year and a half of carefully putting his people in place Aziz no longer needed Abdallahi. Vezzaz did not challenge the contention that Aziz had helped finance Abdallahi's campaign and chided Abdallahi for thinking he could play with the devil.

¶7. (C) Vezzaz described Mauritanian politics as a land of "super delegates" -- the clan, religious, political, village and business leaders who constitute the "notables" who can generally deliver votes. He saw the post-August 6 reaction as predictable given Mauritania's history. "Our tradition is that military coups succeed. The notables assumed this one would succeed whether they liked it or not. Since the Taya coup resulted in 20 years of military rule, any notable who wanted a position or privilege in the future made the logical decision to fall in line with the coup." Vezzaz said this coup proved different -- the unprecedented internal opposition coupled with anti-coup international solidarity was making the notables think the success of the coup is no longer a given. Vezzaz saw the 20-member shift in the Senate away from the junta as not so much opportunism as a realization among that group of notables that there was a chance (he was less generous with the pro-coup deputies in the National Assembly suggesting they didn't have the personal stature of "notable" -- they had won "independent" campaigns financed by the military and had no future possibilities unless the military retains its political clout).

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¶8. (C) Vezzaz saw the greatest weakness of the Abdallahi governments was poor communication -- an inability to reach out to either the notables or, by passing them, directly to the people. Some of the new ministers, Vezzaz said, assumed the arrogance of power from day one. While he saw Prime Minister Zeidane as smart, he said "it was over for him" when he acted too much like an economist and too little as a politician when food and energy cost increases first began to bite in October 2007 -- recalling with Charge a Nero-esque speech Zeidane gave in November as cities throughout Mauritania were rioting that spoke of Mauritania's with-in projections inflation rates and higher than anticipated currency reserves. The speech was out of touch with common Mauritians. Vezzaz said a future democratic government (one he hopes to participate in) will do a better job explaining what it is doing and why and will have a better dialogue with all the key stakeholders.

¶9. (C) Turning to the current situation, Vezzaz took pains to thank the U.S. for its principled position since the beginning of the coup. He said the stance had surprised Mauritians who assumed the U.S. had other interests in Mauritania than democracy (whether access to natural resources or security) and that even those who support the military respect that the U.S. has stood firm. He said the FNDD had been very nervous last week when the French Minister of Cooperation had spoken of the situation in Mauritania as "a coup d'etat, but one with very unusual circumstances." Vezzaz said the FNDD was very concerned about the French adding, "I know "the French" means many things -- there is the Elysee but there are also the bureaucracy, the military and intelligence services, and commercial interests." Vezzaz said the FNDD knows President Sarkozy is an anti-coup stalwart, but is unsure how long little Mauritania will keep his attention before more "subtle French tendencies" take

over. Vezzaz saw the U.S. declaration of visa sanctions on the 17th as a signal from Washington for Europe to be firm -- he saw the Paris fiasco for the regime as being possible only because of the timely U.S. action. While seeing the political tide turning against the junta, Vezzaz said any softening of international resistance would be fatal. Only two months after the coup, Vezzaz said the junta already saw Spain as an ally. A weakening of the French or U.S. position will encourage them to wait it out for six months or more until international resolve withers away. Speaking of U.S. visa sanctions, Vezzaz said he understood the policy affected persons only if they actually make a visa application (i.e. without a pre-approved "black list") but argued publishing a list would have a far greater effect. (Comment: Mauritanian web-sites published on October 21 what was purported to be the U.S. black list -- likely an FNDD attempt to put the fear of god into coup supporters on our behalf. End Comment).

¶10. (C) Vezzaz was critical of discussions of the return of President Abdallahi coupled with a short transition to new elections. While he believed the President's prestige had been sufficiently damaged that he could no longer complete his five-year mandate, Vezzaz argued that anything short of an 18-month transition would ensure the worst of outcomes -- the democratic election of an inherently undemocratic individual. Vezzaz said he doubted Abdallahi would want to run again believing that a weakened public figure cannot win.

In that case he saw only Aziz, Vall and Ould Daddah as candidates who could put together a short-notice campaign. Ould Daddah, in Vezzaz's view, has flip flopped too much and has lost his following. Even if Ould Daddah is given the benefit of the doubt for having democratic convictions (which Vezzaz does not believe), Vezzaz does not believe Ould Daddah can win. That would leave one of two military leaders as the only likely winners. Recalling his earlier "super delegate" theme, Vezzaz argues that any three to six month transition period would be read by the "notables" as a guaranteed military victory in which case the notables will make the "logical decision" of supporting the military (again). A year-and-a-half or longer transition with the military well and good out of politics would give a transition government under Abdallahi the chance to prove that an unencumbered democratic government can deliver the goods (Comment: Vezzaz acknowledged that all the work he had done getting donor money on stream before the coup was effectively lost and that he or someone else would have to start all over again. End Comment).

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¶11. (C) Charge closed the one-on-one dinner with Vezzaz on a sensitive question -- how is the anti-coup movement financing itself. Charge noted there were multiple rumors that there had been significant transfers from government to private accounts on the day of the coup which some assumed was the funding source for the FNDD's international travel, operating costs, high quality publications, and websites. Vezzaz refuted the charge strongly challenging Charge to find one such transfer. He added that even if those close to the President had wanted to move the money somewhere the military couldn't grab it, there had been no advanced notice to plan for that. Furthermore, with Governor of the Central Bank Kane siding with the coup and with multiple military-supporters planted in his own ministry, Vezzaz said they would have been blocked from overcoming the very financial safeguards he himself had put in place. Vezzaz said that the FNDD's position is precarious. Each party is contributing something and they are getting some support from unnamed international human rights NGOs. Noting the support the junta is getting from key businessmen like Mauritanian mogul Bouamatou, Vezzaz added that some businessmen see the pro-coup business supporters as trying to take over and are, discretely, providing modest financing. Vezzaz noted the international travel of the Abdallahi emissaries is being kept modest. He noted that one minister, Ould Kelb, who had received a U.S. visa to go to New York for UNGA didn't go in

the end because the FNDD couldn't get the money together in  
time for a ticket.  
HANKINS